Hurt-Proofing Ourselves
by Joe Blow

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The other day I was having a discussion with a friend about whether or not a particular song in a famous Broadway and Hollywood musical amounted to an offensively racist caricature. I was countering the arguments for it being seen as racist, but I knew that, for me, it was just a game. The song made my friend angry. To me it was just a song in a musical which I enjoy.

I thought about this further to myself, but didn't express my broader thoughts on the topic at the time. "Nothing offends me," I thought. "As far as I'm concerned someone could do a whole musical in blackface and I wouldn't be bothered by it. It wouldn't make me feel bad personally, and why should I be offended on someone else's behalf. Aren't we all able to be offended for ourselves without any help."

This may seem callous or selfish. I'm not saying that this is how everyone should view these things. But if we examine what is going on here I think we can learn something useful.

We have a saying : "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." But we know that this is not true. Other people's insults and putdowns do hurt us. Often they hurt a lot. But why?

To understand this we need to go back to our childhood. The reason we had greater emotional resilience and a greater capacity for joy when we were young children is because our self-acceptance had not yet been compromised. We seemed to ourselves acceptable because nobody had yet taught us that we might be unacceptable in any way. As we got older we were subjected to criticism by adults and other children. If we understood this as an expression of displeasure with our behaviour alone and not a sign that there was something essentially wrong with us, our self-acceptance would not have been compromised. But this can be a fine distinction for a child to have to make. Also we were taught a value system and a set of social norms. If these were unreasonably harsh then we probably developed unforgiving expectations regarding our own behaviour. We developed a conscience which was less like a friendly guide and more like an oppressive dictator who punished us for all failures to follow his orders by undermining our sense of ourselves as acceptable.

The basis for mental health is unconditional self-acceptance. But what happened as our self-acceptance was eaten away is that it became conditional. We could accept ourselves if we were good. We could accept ourselves if we were successful. We could accept ourselves if other people accepted us. This is a very vulnerable position to be in because others can undermine our self-acceptance at any time by removing the conditions on which that self-acceptance depends.

We may not realise it but we live within a kind of psychological economy in which the traded commodities are the requirements for self-acceptance. Most of the control others exercise over us and of the control we exercise, or try to exercise, over others comes from the application of self-acceptance bribes and threats. When we treat someone well, we help them to bolster their self-

acceptance. If we try to control another's behaviour by, for instance, making them feel guilty or shaming them in front of others, we are attempting to blackmail them into behaving in a way which conforms with our own wishes or beliefs about what is right or wrong by trying to take away the conditions for their self-acceptance.

The good news is that we can drop out of this sick economy. Or, if we chose, we can continue to use it against others while being invulnerable to it ourselves. I'm not saying that that would be a healthy thing to do, but it would be possible. The healthy thing to do is to hurt-proof ourselves and teach others how to do likewise. The more hurt-proof individuals there are in the world, the less scope there is for anyone to oppress others.

Of course not all forms of oppression are based on exclusively psychological transactions. Those in positions of power can make decisions prejudicial to those they don't like for whatever reason. And there is always the possibility of violence. But if we are hurt-proof we have a better base from which to deal with problems of organisational prejudice or violence. And there is more solidarity between hurt-proof individuals to stand against such forms of oppression because social relations between such individuals are not compromised by the inherent fragility of self-acceptance exchanges. The less we need the more we are there for each other.

So how do we hurt-proof ourselves?

Let's go back to that saying : "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." Why do names hurt us? If we are black, why does it hurt to be called a "nigger"? If we are gay, why does it hurt to be called a "queer"? Why does it hurt if someone says we are "ugly" or "pathetic" or "a loser"?

The reason is that we don't fully accept ourselves. Our self-acceptance has been worn down by this kind of thing. We've taken the put-downs "on board". We have allowed ourselves to get to the point where our self-acceptance is dependent, among other things, on people *not* calling us these things. When people do so, it upsets our emotional equilibrium. It makes us feel angry or hurt or frightened. Of course the fear may sometimes be applicable if the behaviour is indicative of a desire to do violence to us.

The way to hurt-proof ourselves is to re-learn unconditional self-acceptance. I say re-learn because we knew how to unconditionally accept ourselves as young children. The learning process we went through was that of learning that we were unacceptable or could be unacceptable in various ways. So hurt-proofing can be understood as a kind of unlearning or deprogramming of the unhelpful lessons we learned growing up. We are not brainwashing ourselves to believe that we are acceptable. We are rediscovering a more accountable truth about ourselves.

This may all seem very theoretical, but there is a very powerful and simple strategy which can help us down this path. Unconditional self-acceptance is something we practice, and the more we practice the more proficient we get at it. It is like building up a muscle. This is an important analogy because, while we want to become more like our child self, what we don't want is the child's vulnerability to having its self-acceptance under-mined. Back then we had unconditional self-acceptance because we had not yet been exposed to the harsh realities of life among those whose loss of such self-acceptance also undermined their acceptance of others, including ourselves. For a few years we are usually protected from the full savagery of the neurotic economy of the psyche. We need to regain our state of health, but we also need to know what we did not know as a child, and that is how to protect that state.

Re-gaining unconditional self-acceptance can involve constantly reminding ourselves that we are acceptable irrespective of what we do, what we feel, what we think, what we have and what others think of us. You might question the inclusion of "what we do". Aren't we unacceptable if we do something really terrible? The problem with this way of thinking is that we are blackmailing ourselves. We are saying that the reason not to do something really terrible is that we will remove our self-acceptance if we do. But a shortage of self-acceptance is most likely the motivating force behind doing something really terrible in the first place. The natural state of the unconditionally accepting, and thus non-neurotic, individual is one of benevolence, love, clarity of mind and creativity. If we wish to persuade ourselves not to do something really terrible, the best argument is

not that it would make us unacceptable, but that it would be against our own best interests. People who do really terrible things rarely have very rewarding lives. And past actions can't be changed, so to view ourselves as unacceptable because of a past action, no matter how terrible, would only be appropriate if viewing ourselves that way was going to make us less likely to do something like that in future. Since lack of self-acceptance is the root cause of destructive actions, this would be likely to have the opposite effect.

We might want to make use of an affirmation. In this case, why not use the simple affirmation : "I am acceptable." The problem with some affirmations, it seems to me, is that they can set up expectations. If we say : "I am as calm as the lily pad that floats on a tranquil pond," that's all well and good until the next time we lose our temper, and then our self-acceptance is likely to be undermined by the fact that we haven't lived up to our own affirmation. "I am acceptable," doesn't seem to have any short-comings and it is a simple expression of the truth with which we are seeking to reconnect.

But this is not the powerful strategy. The powerful strategy is one which we can use when presented by anything which might emotionally destabilise us, especially things others might say which tend to leave us feeling angry or hurt.

In our state of conditional self-acceptance, what happens if someone says something to us which compromises that state? What if someone upsets those conditions on which our self-acceptance depends? The first thing which happens is that we take on board what they are saying. If it were a missile we would say that it hits home. Then, if we don't collapse in a heap, we mount our resistance. We tell ourselves why what the other person has said is not true or not relevant. Or we tell *them*, perhaps angrily. So we may fight back, but only *after* having been wounded. The habitual defences, conceptual and or verbal, that we use to defend ourselves in these situations are a fundamental part of our character armour. Character armour is a structure of defensive habits. It tends to come into play when we feel threatened, but it can also be something we hide behind in anticipation of being threatened.

If we think of the words or attitudes which might upset us as missiles and ourselves as a ship against whose hull they are aimed, then there is an alternative to the armour which only comes into play after we have been struck. That alternative involves making the ship *itself* so invincible that the missiles explode impotently like amusing fireworks rather than doing any damage.

This involves a trick which gives us control over the emotional transaction.

Let's look at an example :

Fred comes up to me on the street and he says : "Joe, you're a disgusting piece of shit."

I don't respond. What I say to myself is : "Fred is a person who is saying that I'm a piece of shit."

Of course this is a skill which might take a little while to learn. We need to learn to take pause, and that in itself can be a challenge. But the more we practise the easier it gets. It won't protect us the first time, but it will after the point at which it becomes habit.

What are we doing when we take this approach? We are removing ourselves from the subjective situation and giving ourselves a way to look at it objectively.

What we would normally be doing is going through this kind of process :

"Joe, you're a disgusting piece of shit."

(I'm a piece of shit. Hey, wait a minute. I'm not a piece of shit. How can Fred say something like that. I'll get Fred for saying I'm a piece of shit.)

Fred has got to me.

Even if my response is modified somewhat by saying "Fred thinks I'm a piece of shit", this is still something which might make me feel less acceptable.

By thinking "Fred is a person who is saying that I'm a piece of shit" I am stripping the situation down to the bare facts. I am not validating the opinion that I am a piece of shit. I'm not even validating the idea that Fred genuinely thinks I'm a piece of shit. He is a person who is saying that. (Of course, it might be more correct to say "he is a person who said that" but somehow the present tense has a more powerfully distancing effect to the past tense.)

Rather than being a person who experiences themselves as being under attack we have put ourselves in a role comparable to that of a scientist observing Fred's behaviour as if he were an amoeba on a laboratory slide.

From this perspective our assessment of what has been said becomes evidence-based rather than emotion-based. Fred is someone who is saying that I'm a piece of shit. Is there evidence for his point of view? Why might he think this way? Is there something wrong with him? Are there factors not directly related to me which are influencing his current attitude? We have the equanimity to ask ourselves these questions because we didn't take on board what Fred was saying directly as a transaction in the economy of self-acceptance. And the more we practise this approach the more our self-acceptance becomes disentangled from what others have to say about us.

You might think I'm advocating a life-style of cold rationality. Nothing could be further from the truth. This is a technique to be used where it is useful, not something adopted as an habitual approach to life. If I'm walking down the street and a pretty girl smiles at me I'm hardly going to say to myself : "There is a member of the female gender who is looking at me and curling her lips in a way traditionally associated with friendly feelings." It feels good to be smiled at. This strategy is aimed only at learning how to become invulnerable to social transactions which would leave us feeling disempowered. And it is aimed at disempowering those who would hold us to ransom over our own self-acceptance.

This is also a strategy we can use on ourselves. Let's look at a way it might be used to help us beat addictive behaviour. Maybe I have a problem with chewing my nails. There I am chewing my nails and thinking "I just can't stop chewing my nails." I'm hardly likely to learn to stop when I'm arguing so persuasively against my own ability to do so. Let's try that again. "I'm a person who chews his nails." Not much better, because I'm tying my self-identity to the fact that I chew my nails. "I'm a person who is chewing his nails." Now I'm clearly faced with the situation, with nothing to undermine any strategy I might come up with to help me stop. And the situation seems much less overwhelming.

By following this strategy we can take ourselves out of the defensive position, and this brings tremendous benefits. Over time we find that we don't need our character armour, and it is only when we no longer need it that we discover just how much of an impediment it was.

When we are armoured we can only acknowledge reality to the extent that it doesn't seriously threaten our armour. Where to acknowledge the truth about something would destabilise us, because our self-acceptance is conditional on that thing not being true, we are forced to live in denial.

Let's say that Sally sees a beautiful clearing in the woods and thinks it would be the perfect place to set up a vegan donut stand. People say she is crazy, you can't sell donuts in the middle of the forest. But she goes ahead and buys the land and builds her donut stand. And it turns out to be a big success. She's never succeeded at anything before in her life. Everyone said she was a loser. Now people are travelling all the way into the woods to buy her delicious donuts. People don't call her a loser any more. They love her because of her donuts. But then, one day, an ecologist comes and tells her that the place where she has built her successful donut stand was once the breeding ground of the fluorescent woodpecker. As a result of her donut stand, this beautiful bird has become extinct. We will never see one again. What can she do but put her fingers in her ears and go "blah-blah-blah"? In her own mind her acceptability as a human being is dependent on the ideas that she doesn't harm animals and that her donut stand is a success.

Many of us have our own vegan donut stands and our fluorescent woodpeckers. It is the truths we can't face about ourselves, because they would compromise our fragile self-acceptance, which lead to a spectrum of problems from failed marriage to war. Love is a form of communication characterised by openness, honesty, spontaneity and generosity. If a relationship is between two people whose self-acceptance is not conditional, it will be a loving relationship. But a relationship of dependence based on fulfilling the other party's conditions for their own self-acceptance is bound to be fraught with tension and not conducive to love. Why does marital infidelity sometimes make us so mad that we will kill our partner and risk spending many years in jail? Because our self-acceptance has become totally conditional on having a faithful partner. We would view the incident

as a trivial one if this were not the case. It is the damage done to our fragile ego which keeps it from being trivial. And for many patriotic individuals, the belief that their country is a knight in shining armour and any country which would attack it or interfere with its interests could not possibly have a legitimate grievance, is a major feature of their character armour. If this were not the case, peace in the Middle East would not be such an elusive dream.

Let's look at the subject of political beliefs. I'll keep it very simple. I'm not interested in how political beliefs differ, only in how we relate to our own political beliefs and those of others. So we'll just talk about one person who identifies themselves as a conservative and another who identifies themselves as a liberal.

How grounded a person's political belief system is, whether conservative or liberal, is dependent on their level of self-acceptance. If our self-acceptance is unconditional then we will look around us at the world and take in what is going on and listen to all sorts of different ideas. There will be no need to filter what we take in in the way of information or ideas in order to protect us from anything which might contravene the conditions of our self-acceptance. This means that, when we form our belief system, conservative or liberal, it will be founded on a lot of information and a clear understanding of what various individuals on both sides of the political spectrum propose. Such an individual will have stability when it comes to discussing politics as they will in all other areas, as a result of the solid foundations of their self-acceptance. But if someone's self-acceptance is heavily compromised and thus conditional, their political allegiance may quickly become a part of their character armour. I'm acceptable because I'm a liberal. I'm acceptable because I'm a conservative. This leads to two things. If I'm acceptable because I'm a liberal, that means that conservatives are not acceptable. So I am in a strongly adversarial position from the get go, where the vehemence of my opposition to conservatives may become a crucial element in maintaining my self-acceptance. Also, to maintain my position, in the absence of the grounded understanding achieved by the unconditionally self-accepting individual, I will need to filter out or deny any information or ideas which might call my insecure liberal position into question. I may also find myself focussing obsessively on the misdeeds of individual conservatives as a way of reinforcing my liberal-good, conservative-bad dichotomy. And, of course, all these things would be the same if I were a conservative whose conservatism was a crucial part of his character armour.

We can get an idea of how armoured someone is in their political views by how angry they become at those with the opposite allegiance. This doesn't mean that a person whose political views are less armoured may not view the fact that so many people push for an opposite approach as a problem, but they will not feel it as a personal affront. A doctor recognises that cancer is a problem, but he doesn't launch into a tirade about the evil of cancer. He calmly sets about doing something about the problem. When we look around at a lot of the political conflicts that are going on in our society we can see just how many of us are so desperate to hang onto our fragile vision of ourselves as good guys standing in opposition to bad guys that we are not living in the real world.

So lets get back to where we started with the question of protecting ourselves or each other from racist musicals. Being subjected to abuse and prejudice because of one's skin colour can tend to undermine one's self-acceptance. A musical in which white actors wear black face, in this day and age, might be one straw too many for the camel's back, even though all that is happening is that a bunch of actors are putting a particular kind of make-up on their face. The thing itself is trivial. The effect it has may not be. To someone who has learned the art of unconditional self-acceptance, it's intrinsic triviality is clear. It is no skin off their nose how somebody else decides to comport themselves on a theatre stage.

Now I'm not advocating that we reinstate the institution of the Black and White Minstrel Show. I use this example in order to highlight a significant problem and two approaches to dealing with it. Racist musicals are not a common problem in our society, but other hurtful expressions are. There is hate speech and cyber-bullying on the internet. And many of us are subjected to verbal abuse at other times.

The main approach we take to trying to address these problems and protect those most vulnerable to them is by trying to control such expressions. We may legislate against them and/or

we may try to shame those who engage in such practices into stopping. But control strategies never actual solve problems. They may contain them temporarily or they may push evidence of them from one place or time to another place or time. Laws and social pressure give us the ability to force individuals to repress expression of their hostile feelings, but repression doesn't make those hostile feelings go away. The roots of hostility can only be healed when everything is out in the open. The road to health is one which leads towards freedom not away from it.

I'm not arguing that we should abandon attempts to control expressions of hostility. I'm only trying to highlight the limitations of that approach.

The other approach is to promote an understanding of how we can hurt-proof ourselves. We can't possibly protect a psychologically vulnerable individual from all of the expressions of hostility or prejudice which might be painful for them, but we can easily teach the skill of hurt-proofing, so that they don't need such protection. And the same technique addresses other problems. Take body image. We can't protect a vulnerable teenager from seeing fashion magazines, but teach them unconditional self-acceptance and they can't possibly develop anorexia or bulimia.

But one word of warning. Don't try using the method I've outlined above out loud with someone. To have one's power taken away to such a degree must be incredibly frustrating. When having an argument with a friend I responded to his expression of a particular opinion with "You are a person who is saying that. Why should it effect me?" He ended up physically attacking me. Be aware that, if words cease to hurt you, some may resort to sticks and stones.

About the Author

Joe Blow is the pseudonym for a man who, though currently happy and high functioning, has had a long history of mental illness, including endogenous depression, bipolar disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder. His writing is the product of a lifelong struggle to integrate flashes of insight and powerful symbols which appeared to him, often during what we might define as psychotic episodes, with observable reality and a rudimentary knowledge of science by appropriating useful concepts from the work of such iconoclastic thinkers as Wilhelm Reich, R. D. Laing, Keith Johnstone, William Blake and Oscar Wilde.

If asked whether this approach and this conceptual framework have provided him with a secure foundation for emotional stability, happiness and flowering creativity, Blow would reply, "Well, so far so good."

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